Engaging Men: Strategies and dilemmas in violence prevention education among men

Michael Flood

CITATION: Flood, M. (2002-2003). Engaging Men: Strategies and dilemmas in violence prevention education among men. *Women Against Violence: A Feminist Journal*, 13: 25-32.

(Copy also available as printed, in PDF)

Efforts to prevent violence against women will fail unless they undermine the cultural and collective supports for physical and sexual assault found among many men. Men are the overwhelmingly majority of the perpetrators of violence against women, a substantial minority of males accept violence-supportive attitudes and beliefs, and cultural constructions of masculinity shape men's use of physical and sexual violence against women. Educational strategies which lessen such social supports for violence therefore are vital. This paper outlines recent Australian community education campaigns directed at men and the dilemmas with which they deal. It then identifies five key challenges in such work.

Violence against women is more likely in contexts in which manhood is culturally defined as linked to dominance, toughness, or male honour (Heise 1998: 277). Where 'being a man' involves aggressiveness, the repression of empathy and a sense of entitlement to power, those men who are violent are acting out the dictates of what it means to be a 'normal' male. Some men are more likely to physically or sexually assault women: men who have hostile and negative sexual attitudes towards women, who identify with traditional images of masculinity and male gender role privilege, who believe in rape stereotypes, and who see violence as manly and desirable (O'Neil & Harway 1997; Scully 1990). Violence against women is more likely in families, communities, and societies characterised by male dominance and patriarchal authority (Heise 1998).

Violence prevention efforts must address such relationships between violence, social constructions of masculinity and gendered power relations. Formal prevention and control strategies such as sound laws and integrated criminal responses are important. They can help victims' recovery and hinder perpetrators' re-offending, and they have symbolic value. But they can do little in a climate where most women do not formally report abusive events, most survivors remain silent (DeKeseredy, Schwartz & Alvi 2000: 921), and dominant beliefs about violence convince many women that their experience was not rape or assault at all or that it was their fault (Kelly & Radford 1996).

Men have been invited to contribute to the goal of ending violence against women in various contexts: in perpetrator programs, through profeminist men's anti-violence activism (Flood 2005), through education in the police, law and medicine, and through

community education campaigns. The remainder of this paper centres on the last approach. I focus on efforts directed at adult men rather than those among boys for example in schools, although many of the dilemmas discussed are similar.

There is in most Western countries a systematic gender gap in attitudes towards violence (Flood and Pease 2006). A significant minority of males agree with violence-supportive beliefs and myths, and males continue to show more violence-supportive attitudes than females. In Australia for example, the most recent national survey found that one fifth of men agreed that "Women often say 'No' when they mean 'Yes'", and one sixth agreed that "Women who are raped often ask for it" (ANOP Research Services 1995). One in six males aged 12 to 20 agrees that "It's okay for a boy to make a girl have sex with him if she has flirted with him or led him on" (National Crime Prevention 2001: 64-70). In general, males have narrower definitions of domestic violence than females and they are less likely to rate a range of forms of violence as very serious. At the same time, men's (and women's) attitudes are improving over time.

Violence prevention

In Australia only a handful of community education campaigns have attempted to undermine social and cultural supports among adult men for violence against women. However, a recent New South Wales (NSW) campaign is one of the best examples of community education directed at men. The campaign is titled "Violence Against Women — It's Against All the Rules," and was run from 2000 to 2003 by the Violence Against Women Specialist Unit of the NSW Attorney General's Department. The campaign is targeted at men aged 21 to 29, and takes the form of posters, booklets, and radio advertisements. It uses high profile sportsmen and sporting language to deliver the message that violence against women is unacceptable. For example, a famous rugby league player is shown alongside the words, "Force a woman into touch? That's sexual assault." A well-known cricketer says, "Sledging a woman? That's abuse." A soccer player says, "Mark a woman, watch her every move? That's stalking."

Defining manhood as non-violent

Community education strategies directed at men have adopted three broad strategies. The first is to promote alternative constructions of masculinity, gender and selfhood which foster non-violence. This embodies the recognition that men's violence against women is informed by the cultural association between violence and masculinity — by the social construction of violence as a normal, palatable, or inevitable part of manhood. Some campaigns enact this strategy indirectly. The NSW campaign tries to rewrite the cultural meanings given to men's violent behaviour, by linking physical and sexual behaviours to actions on the sporting field which are literally 'against the rules'. Other campaigns try more directly to re-script cultural expectations of manhood or undermine an association between manhood and violence.

Efforts to lessen men's tolerance of violence against women at times have attempted to redefine violence as unmanly or manliness as non-violent, therefore representing violence and masculinity as contradictory. "Real men don't bash or rape women" was the bold message of some posters in the 1993-1994 national campaign by the Office for

the Status of Women. Similarly, the NSW campaign materials state that "sports role models can show that a masculine man is not a violent man" (Violence Against Women Specialist Unit 2000: 24). Although the notion of redefining masculinity as non-violent was not explicit in the NSW advertisements, a quarter of men who had seen the campaign described the main message as being, "You don't have to be violent to be a real man" (Hubert 2003: 38-39).

Community education campaigns overseas have used similar strategies. The American campaign "My strength is not for hurting," encourages men to practise consent and respect in their sexual relations. This campaign attempts to reconfigure a trait traditionally associated with masculinity, strength, such that it now embodies non-violence and moral selfhood. Other approaches ask, "Are you *man enough* to turn away from violence [or] to stand up to violence?", or describe violence as 'weak' and 'cowardly'. The first draws upon boys' existing investments in male identity and desires to become adult men, in order to invite non-violence, while the second represents violence as contrary to the qualities of strength, bravery, self-control and moral courage associated with 'true' masculinity (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998: 247).

Such approaches represent a strategy of both complicity in and challenge to masculinity. On the one hand, appeals to male identity and stereotypically masculine qualities are complicit in common constructions of masculinity and collude with males' investments in manhood. On the other hand, such appeals also attempt to shift the meanings associated with maleness.

We should be wary of approaches which appeal to men's sense of 'real' manhood or invite them to 'prove themselves *as men*'. These may intensify men's investment in male identity, and this is part of what keeps patriarchy in place (Stoltenberg 1990). Such appeals are especially problematic if they suggest that there are particular qualities which are essentially or exclusively male. This reinforces notions of biological essentialism and determinism and denies valuable qualities such as strength and courage to women.

Nevertheless, community education addressing males should speak to questions of identity. Boys and young men often struggle with the formation of their gendered identities, negotiating competing discourses of manhood and heterosexuality. There is often a dichotomy between their public projection of a confident masculinity and their experience of private anxieties and insecurities (Mac an Ghaill 1994: 99). These processes of identify formation represent a critical opportunity for violence prevention. Education campaigns can model identities based on moral reasoning, justice and selfhood rather than gender-identity anxiety, dominance and manhood (Stoltenberg 2001).

A strategy of complicity and challenge is an understandable and indeed desirable response to the real challenge of educating men on gender issues. Efforts to reach men must negotiate a tension between two necessary elements: between speaking to men in ways which engage with the realities of their lives, and transforming the patriarchal power relations and gendered discourses which are the fabric of those same lives.

Draw on masculine culture

It is now firmly established in violence prevention networks that one's strategies must be 'culturally appropriate'. They must be sensitive to the audience's values and needs and draw on culturally specific languages. The NSW campaign's use of sporting language is an ideal example, and evaluations suggest that men did perceive the campaign as meaningful and clever.

However, there is little discourse among men with which to build a culture of violence prevention, and this poses real difficulties for community education. The NSW campaign was unsuccessful in encouraging men to talk about violence against women. Ninety percent of men in the target group who had seen or heard something of the campaign reported that violence against women was not an issue they would talk about with their peers (Hubert 2003: 32-33). Aboriginal men were the exception, and this reflects a growing conversation in indigenous communities about family violence and sexual abuse.

In trying to appeal to and engage with men, education campaigns have drawn on stereotypical masculine culture. This poses more fundamental dilemmas for violence prevention. The NSW campaign draws on male-focused sports, but sporting culture also contributes to the construction of violent masculinity as a cultural norm. Sport is an important site for teaching boys and men some of the key values associated with dominant masculinity, such as extreme competitiveness, aggression and dominance. The "combat sport subculture" of games such as rugby melds athleticism, manliness, and violence (Schissel 2000). Violence is normalised, naturalised and rewarded in sport (Messner 1992). Also, athletes report significantly greater agreement with rape-supportive statements than men in general (Boeringer 1999), and cultures of misogyny have been documented in hockey (Robinson 1998; West 1996) and rugby (Schacht 1996). To be fair, the NSW campaign may address these issues by simultaneously shifting sporting culture as it shifts the attitudes of men in general, in that the campaign does involve sporting clubs, training of sportsmen as educators and sports sponsorship.

This example illustrates the dilemmas in drawing on masculine culture to reach men. Approaches such as those in the NSW campaign and the American "My strength is not for hurting" campaign represent a difficult balancing act between complicity and challenge. They collude enough with masculine cultural codes that they engage a male audience, yet hopefully they subvert the association of masculinity and violence enough to make a difference to men's attitudes and behaviours.

Men speaking out

The third key strategy in community education campaigns directed at men is to show men speaking out or standing together against violence. Some campaigns use male celebrities and sporting heroes in their materials, while others depict 'ordinary' men of the community collectively voicing their concern about violence against women.

There are three rationales for this strategy. First, these men function as role models, whose intolerance for violence ideally will be emulated. Focus group participants for

the NSW campaign perceived the sportsmen to be credible and authoritative 'real men'. But they also praised the fact that these were 'ordinary blokes' with faults and weaknesses, rather than 'gods' like Pat Rafter who probably 'unpacks the dishwasher for his mum' (Hubert 2003: 40-41).

Second, peer acceptance and collective norms are particularly influential among men. Men's lives are highly organised by relations between men. Males seek the approval of other males, both identifying with and competing against them. If men's perceptions of collective masculine norms can be shifted, then individual men may shift as well.

Third, ours is a culture in which men's voices are granted greater authority than women's voices. It is probably true that men will listen more to men than to women. We may think it highly desirable that men listen to *women's* voices, to women's stories of the harms and indeed the pleasures of their relations with men. But it may be more effective to continue to use men to say the things that we wish men could hear from women.

Key challenges

In violence prevention work with males, the overarching challenge is to both engage with and reconstruct men and masculine culture. There are five further challenges in this work.

Undermine discourses of sexuality

The first is to undermine powerful discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality which support violence against women. For example, some men (and women) subscribe to the idea that male sexuality is an uncontrollable or barely controllable force or 'drive' (Kippax, Crawford & Waldby 1994: S318). This notion has been used to deny, downplay or defend men's sexual violence against women, and to place the burden of responsibility for rape with women. It is up to women not to 'provoke' men or 'lead them on', as men cannot be held responsible for their actions (Richardson 1997: 161). Such notions are related to a second discourse in which women are the gatekeepers and guardians of sexual safety, with responsibility for both their own and men's sexual behaviour.

A third construction, the sexual double standard, also feeds into sexual violence. This involves two standards of sexual behaviour: girls and women who are sexually active or seen to be so receive negative sexual reputations as "sluts" or "slags" (or any of a wide variety of other terms), while males receive positive labels like "stud" or "legend". More widely, women's sexual behaviour is highly controlled and harshly judged, while men's sexual behaviour is freer of social constraint (Hillier et al. 1998; Holland et al. 1996). Rape is often excused or denied with reference to women as "sluts", and young women perceived as 'easy' are likely to be more vulnerable to sexual violence (National Crime Prevention 2001: 43).These constructions must be eroded, through innovative and culturally relevant messages.

Teach young men how to do consent

In running workshops with young heterosexual men, I have asked, "How do you know that you are not pressuring the girl you're with into sex?" (Flood 2002). Many young men rely on problematic indicators such as the absence of resistance, body language, or previous or current sexual activity. Many have little idea of how to negotiate different forms of sexual activity and are too embarrassed or self-conscious to explicitly negotiate consent. And indeed, some young men simply do not care whether or not the girl is consenting, or even find forced sex arousing. It is vital that we teach young men why consent is important *and* how to negotiate consent.

Target masculine bonding and culture

Male bonding feeds sexual violence against women, and sexual violence against women feeds male bonding. The cultures and collective rituals of male bonding among closely knit male fraternities, street gangs and male athletes foster sexual assault of women (Sanday 1990; Martin & Hummer 1989). In turn, rape can be practised as a means to and an expression of male bonding (Scully 1990). Especially among young men, attachment to male peers who encourage and legitimate woman abuse is a significant predictor of perpetrating abuse (Flood and Pease 2006: 40-42).

Violence prevention strategies among men therefore must also include interventions into local violence-supportive cultures. On university campuses with high rates of sexual violence, some of the socio-cultural correlates (especially among male college fraternities) include an ethic of male sexual conquest, high alcohol consumption, homophobia, use of pornography, and general sexist norms (Sanday 1996).

Address social diversity

Prevention strategies must also address the complex intersections of class, race and ethnicity which shape women's and men's experiences of and involvements in assault. For example, male perpetrators are more likely to be held accountable and criminalized, and their crimes are more likely to be seen as linked to their ethnicity, if they are poor, black or men of color (Russo 2001, 147-162).

Is it possible to acknowledge that males' violence-supportive attitudes are shaped by social variables such as ethnicity without also reinforcing racism? A recent national survey found that among young people aged 12 to 20, about one-fifth agreed with the use of violence by both sexes. These young people were more likely to be male, younger (12-14 years), of lower socioeconomic status, and from Middle Eastern or Asian backgrounds. This cluster was also significantly more likely to hold traditional views about gender roles (National Crime Prevention 2001: 81-90).

The ease with which existing racist assumptions can be reinforced was illustrated in the experience of the NSW campaign. While more than half of men correctly perceived that the campaign was aimed at men in general, one in eight thought it was aimed at particular ethnic groups (Hubert 2003: 36-37).

Address men's victimisation

The final challenge, perhaps the hardest of them all, is to address men's own experience of violence and to pre-empt the rejection of violence prevention messages associated with not doing so. In evaluations of the NSW campaign, some men responded that men too are the victims of violence, including by women (Hubert 2003: 50-51).

There are three ways of understanding this complaint. Perhaps it is a legitimate claim about men's own subjection to violence, as men are the majority of the victims of physical assaults and homicide. But the great majority of perpetrators also are male. Men are most at risk of physical harm from other men, whereas the men in the NSW campaign who emphasise men's victimisation seem to focus on violence *by women*.

This leads to a second explanation, in which this response is an expression of anti-feminist backlash and defensiveness. It represents the success of men's rights and fathers' rights advocates in communicating the falsehood that women are violent to men as much as men are violent to women. (For critiques of this claim, see Flood (1999) and Kimmel (2002).) And it is a defensive reaction to the critique of men's violence against women.

However, in a third reading, men's response is a inevitable although misleading extension of feminist successes in re-defining violence. Feminist accounts of domestic violence routinely list verbal, emotional and psychological forms of abuse alongside physical violence. These embody the recognition that men's physical violence to women they know very often is accompanied by other forms of abusive and harmful behaviour (Macdonald 1998: 27-32). But they also allow men to re-name their own experiences of verbal conflict, name-calling, and stereotypically feminine 'nagging' as 'verbal and emotional abuse' or 'emotional violence'. In many cases, this trivialises the term "violence" by applying it to instances of their female partners' behaviour which are unpleasant but not particularly harmful. It also represents an ignorance of the real horror associated with the systematic emotional and psychological abuse to which some women are subjected. Whichever reading we think is most accurate, we will need to respond to men's perceptions of victimisation.

Conclusion

Profound changes in men's lives and social constructions of masculinity are necessary if violence against women is to be eliminated. Community education strategies are a key element in violence prevention. They face particular challenges when they are addressed, as they must be, to men.

Acknowledgement

A version of this chapter was first published in *Women Against Violence*, No. 13, 2002-03 (Melbourne: CASA House).

Bibliography

ANOP Research Services Pty Ltd (1995) *Community Attitudes to Violence Against Women: Detailed report.* Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Office of the Status of Women.

Boeringer, S.B. (1999) Associations of Rape-Supportive Attitudes with Fraternal and Athletic Participation. *Violence Against Women*, 5(1), 81- 90.

Cameron, Margaret (2000) Young Men and Violence Prevention. *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, No. 154, Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

Cheetham, Jacquie (2001) NSW Statewide Campaign to Reduce Violence Against Women: "Violence Against Women — It's Against All the Rules." Paper to conference *Seeking Solutions: Australia's Inaugural Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Conference*. Gold Coast, 5-7 September.

DeKeseredy, Walter S., Martin D. Schwartz, and Shahid Alvi (2000) The Role of Profeminist Men in Dealing with Woman Abuse on the Canadian College Campus. *Violence Against Women*, September, 6(9), pp. 918-935.

Flood, Michael (1999) Claims About Husband Battering. *DVIRC Newsletter*, Summer, Melbourne: Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre, pp. 3-8.

Flood, Michael (2002) Tips for Good Sex Workshop. Unpublished.

Flood, Michael (2005) Men's Collective Struggles for Gender Justice: The Case of Anti-Violence Activism. In *The Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*. Eds Michael Kimmel, Jeff Hearn, and R.W. Connell. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (pp. 458-466).

Flood, Michael, and Bob Pease (2006) *The Factors Influencing Community Attitudes in Relation to Violence Against Women: A Critical Review of the Literature*. Melbourne: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

Gilbert, Rod and Gilbert, Pam (1998) *Masculinity Goes to School*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Heise, Lori L (1998) Violence Against Women: An Integrated, Ecological Framework. *Violence Against Women*, 4(3), June.

Hillier, Lynne, Lyn Harrison, and Deborah Warr (1998) When You Carry Condoms All the Boys Think You Want It': Negotiating Competing Discourses About Safe Sex. *Journal of Adolescence*, 21(1), February.

Holland, Janet, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe, and Rachel Thomson (1996) Reputations: Journeying Into Gendered Power Relations. In Jeffrey Weeks and Janet Holland, (eds) *Sexual Cultures: Communities, Values and Intimacy*. Hampshire & London: Macmillan, pp. 239-260.

Hubert, Carol (2003) Violence Against Women: It's Against All the Rules — *Evaluation of the NSW Statewide Campaign to Reduce Violence Against Women*.

Sydney: Violence Against Women Specialist Unit, NSW Attorney General's Department.

Kelly, Liz, and J. Radford (1996) 'Nothing Really Happened: The Invalidation of Women's Experiences of Sexual Violence.' In M. Hester, L. Kelly & J. Radford (eds), *Women, Violence and Male Power*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Kimmel, Michael S. (2002) 'Gender Symmetry' in Domestic Violence: A Substantive and Methodological Research Review. *Violence Against Women*, 8(11), November.

Kippax, Susan, June Crawford, and Catherine Waldby (1994) Heterosexuality, Masculinity and HIV. *AIDS*, 8 (suppl. 1), pp. S315-S323.

Mac an Ghaill, Mairtin (1994) *The Making of Men: Masculinities, Sexualities and Schooling*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Macdonald, Helen (1998) *What's in a Name? Definitions and Domestic Violence*. Brunswick, VIC: Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre.

Martin, Patricia, and Robert Hummer (1989) Fraternities and Rape on Campus. *Gender and Society*, 3(4), December, pp. 457-473.

Messner, Michael A. (1992) When Bodies are Weapons. *Peace Review*. Volume 4 Issue 3, Autumn, pp. 28-31.

National Crime Prevention (2001) *Young People & Domestic Violence: National Research on Young People's Attitudes and Experiences of Domestic Violence*. Canberra: Crime Prevention Branch, Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department.

O'Neil, James M., and Michele Harway (1997) A Multivariate Model Explaining Men's Violence Toward Women: Predisposing and Triggering Hypotheses. *Violence Against Women*. 3(2), April.

Richardson, Diane (1997) Sexuality and Feminism. In Victoria Robinson and Diane Richardson, (eds) *Introducing Women's Studies: Feminist Theory and Practice*. Hampshire & London: Macmillan, pp. 152–174.

Robinson, L. (1998) *Crossing the Line: Violence and Sexual Assault in Canada's National Sport*. Toronto: McLelland and Stewart.

Russo, Ann (2001) *Taking Back Our Lives: A Call to Action for the Violence Against Women Movement*. New York: Routledge.

Sanday, Peggy Reeves (1990) *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus*. New York & London: New York University Press.

Sanday, Peggy Reeves (1996) Rape-Prone Versus Rape-Free Campus Cultures. *Violence Against Women*, 2(2), June.

Schacht, Steven P. (1996) Misogyny On and Off the 'Pitch': The Gendered World of Male Rugby Players. *Gender & Society*. 10(5), October.

Schissel, Bernard (2000) Boys Against Girls: The Structural and interpersonal Dimensions of Violent Patriarchal Culture in the Lives of Young Men. *Violence Against Women*. 6(9), pp. 960-986.

Scully, Diana (1990) *Understanding Sexual Violence: A Study of Convicted Rapists*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Stoltenberg, John (1990) *Refusing To Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice*. CA & Suffolk: Fontana/Collins.

Stoltenberg, John (2001) Re: [PROFEM] Men Can Stop Rape Feb. Newsletter. *Profem discussion list* (online). 5 Feb. 2001. profem-l@coombs.anu.edu.au.

Violence Against Women Specialist Unit (2000) Violence Against Women — It's Against All the Rules. (Booklet) Sydney: NSW Attorney General's Department, 34 pp.

West, W.G. (1996) Youth Sports and Violence: A Masculine Subculture? In Gary M. O'Bireck, (ed) *Not a Kid Anymore: Canadian Youth, Crime, and Subcultures*. pp. 309–348.